**Decision-Making Methods**

A decision-making method describes who will be making the decision and how others will be involved. There are several distinct decision-making methods, each with advantages and disadvantages.

A clear and explicit decision-making method:

* Enables decision-makers to set clear boundaries for the involvement of others
* Provides members of organizations with clear guidelines on whether and/or how to participate
* Lets people know what to expect and what is expected of them
* Builds support for the final decision



**Clear and explicit decision-making methods build confidence, promote the spirit of collaboration, and supports leaders in sharing responsibility without feeling a loss of control.**

**Levels of Involvement in Decision Making**

*Generally speaking, as the level of involvement in the decision-making increases, so does the level of ownership or buy-in to the process and the outcome.*

***The Six Decision-Making Options***

As a meeting organizer you have six distinct decision-making methods available. Each of these options represents a different approach. Each has pros and cons associated with it. The decision option should always be chosen carefully to be sure it’s the most appropriate method.

These six options are as follows (in reverse order of their relative value):

**Option 6**: **Spontaneous Agreement**

This happens occasionally when there’s a solution that is favored by everyone and 100 percent agreement seems to happen automatically. Unanimous decisions are usually made quickly. They are fairly rare and often occur in connection with the more trivial or simple issues.

**Pros**: It’s fast, easy, everyone is happy. It unites the group.

**Cons**: May be too fast; perhaps the issue actually needed discussion.

**Uses**: When lack of discussion isn’t vital (i.e., issues are trivial) or when issues are not complex, requiring no in-depth discussion.

**Option 5: One Person Decides**

This is a decision that the group decides to refer to one person to make on behalf of the group. A common misconception among teams is that every decision needs to be made by the whole group. In fact, a one-person decision is often a faster and more efficient way to get resolution. The quality of any one person’s decision can be raised considerably if the person making the decision gets advice and input from other group members before they decide.

**Pros:** It’s fast and accountability is clear.

**Cons:** It can divide the group if the person deciding doesn’t consult or makes a decision that others can’t live with. A one-person decision typically lacks both the buy-in and the synergy that comes from a group decision-making process.

**Uses:** When the issue is unimportant or small, when there’s a clear expert in the group, when only one person has the information needed to make the decision and can’t share it, or when one person is solely accountable for the outcome.

**Option 4**: **Compromise**

A negotiated approach applicable when there are several distinct options and members are strongly polarized.

Neither side is willing to accept the solution/position put forth by the other side. A middle position is then created that incorporates ideas from both sides. Throughout the process of negotiation everyone wins a few of their favorite points, but also loses a few items they liked. The outcome is, therefore, something that no one is totally satisfied with. In compromises no one feels they got what they originally wanted, so the emotional reaction is often, “It’s not really what I wanted but I’m going to have to live with it.”

**Pros:** It generates lots of discussion and does create a solution.

**Cons:** Negotiating when people are pushing a favored point of view tends to be adversarial; hence this approach divides the group. In the end everyone wins, but everyone also loses.

**Uses**: When two opposing solutions are proposed, neither of which is acceptable to everyone, or when the group is strongly polarized and compromise is the only alternative.

**Option 3: Multi-voting**

This is a priority-setting tool that is useful in making decisions when the group has a lengthy set of options before them, and rank ordering the options, based on a set of criteria, will clarify the best course of action.

**Pros:** It’s systematic, objective, democratic, non-competitive, and participative. Everyone wins somewhat and feelings of loss are minimal. It’s a fast way of sorting out a complex set of options.

**Cons**: It’s often associated with limited discussion, hence, limited understanding of the options. This may force unsatisfactory choices on people, because the real priorities do not rise to the surface, or people are swayed by each other if the voting is done out in the open rather than electronically or by ballot.

**Uses**: When there’s a long list of alternatives or items from which to choose or when choosing a set of criteria to identify the best course of action.

**Option 2: Majority Voting**

This involves asking people to choose the option they favor, once clear choices have been identified. Usual methods are a show of hands or secret ballot. The quality of voting is always enhanced if there’s good discussion to share ideas before the vote is taken.

**Pros:** It’s fast ‑ decisions can be of high quality if a vote is preceded by a thorough analysis.

**Cons:** It can be too fast and low in quality if people vote based on their personal feelings without the benefit of hearing each other’s thoughts or facts. It creates winners and losers, hence dividing the group. The show of hands method may put pressure on people to conform.

**Uses:** When there are two distinct options and one or the other must be chosen; when decisions must be made quickly, and a division in the group is acceptable; when consensus has been attempted and can’t be reached.

**Option 1**: **Consensus Building**

This involves everyone clearly understanding the situation or problem to be decided, analyzing all of the relevant facts together and then jointly developing solutions that represent the whole group’s best thinking about the optimal decision. Consensus generates a decision about which everyone says, “I can live with it.”

**Pros**: It’s a collaborative effort that unites the group. It demands high involvement. It’s systematic, objective, and fact-driven. It builds buy-in and high commitment to the outcome.

**Cons**: It’s time consuming and produces low-quality decisions if done without proper data collection or if members have poor interpersonal skills.

**Uses**: When decisions will impact the entire group; when buy-in and ideas from all members are essential; when the importance of the decision being made is worth the time it will take to complete the consensus process properly.

Remember that each option has its place so choose the most appropriate method before each decision-making session.

**Factors to Consider:**

* ***Time available:***How much time can be spent on making the decision?
* ***Importance of decision:***How important (versus how trivial) is the issue to group members and to the organization?
* ***Information needed:***How much information and expertise do the group members have regarding this issue?
* ***Need for buy-in:***How much participation is necessary to ensure implementation?
* ***Capability:***How much ability and experience does the group have operating as a decision-making team*?*
* ***Building teamwork:***What is the potential value of using this opportunity to create a stronger team?

**Decision Options Chart**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Option** | **Pros** | **Cons** | **Uses** |
| **Spontaneous Agreement** | * fast, easy * unites | * too fast * lack of discussion | * when full discussion isn’t critical * trivial issues |
| **One Person Decides** | * can be fast * clear accountability | * lack of input * low buy-in * no synergy | * when one person is the expert * individual willing to take sole responsibility |
| **Compromise** | * discussion * creates a solution | * adversarial * win/lose * divides the group | * when positions are polarized; consensus improbable |
| **Multi-voting** | * systematic * objective * participative * feels like a win | * limits dialogue * influenced choices * real priorities may not surface | * to sort or prioritize a long list of options |
| **Majority Voting** | * fast * high quality with dialogue * clear outcome | * may be too fast * winners and losers * no dialogue * influenced choices | * trivial matter * when there are clear options * if division of group is okay |
| **Consensus Building** | * collaborative * systematic * participative * discussion- oriented * encourages commitment | * takes time * requires data and member skills | * important issues * when total buy-in matters |

***Effective Decision-Making Behaviors***

To make any decision process work, group members need to behave themselves in certain specific ways. These behaviors can be shared with the group or generated and agreed to as guidelines in advance of any decision-making session.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Behaviors That Help** | **Behaviors That Hinder** |
| Listening to others’ ideas politely, even when you don’t agree | Interrupting people in mid-sentence |
| Paraphrasing the main points made by another person, especially if you’re about to contradict their ideas | Not acknowledging the ideas that others have put on the table |
| Praising others’ ideas | Criticizing others’ ideas, as opposed to giving them useful feedback |
| Building on others’ ideas | Pushing your own ideas while ignoring others’ input |
| Asking others to critique your ideas and accepting the feedback | Getting defensive when your ideas are analyzed |
| Being open to accepting alternative courses of action | Sticking only to your ideas and blocking suggestions for alternatives |
| Dealing with facts | Basing arguments on feelings |
| Staying calm and friendly towards colleagues | Getting overly emotional; showing hostility in the face of any disagreement |

**References**

Adapted 2011 by Ellie Rilla, University of California Cooperative Extension from *Strengthening Your Facilitation Skills, University of Maine Cooperative Extension,* 2007*;* and *Facilitation at a Glance, Goal QPC,* 2000.